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Giacomo Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*
Nina Stemme (Minnie) *soprano*, Jonas Kaufmann (Dick Johnson) *tenor*, Tomasz Konieczny
(Jack Rance) *baritone*, Norbert Ernst (Nick) *tenor*, Boaz Daniel (Sonora) *baritone*
Orchestra and Chorus of the Vienna State Opera, Franz Welser-Möst *cond*
Marco Arturo Marelli, *stage director*
Sony Classical 88875064069, 2015 (1 DVD: 138 minutes)

Puccini's "American" opera, *La fanciulla del West*, has always been challenging to stage. With a setting simultaneously exotic to its composer and – especially with the wide reach of the Hollywood Western -- familiar to much of its audience, the opera teems with details that are, at best, inadvertently comical, and at worst, offensive. And yet, thanks to its colorful and harmonically daring score, *Fanciulla* is often the one Puccini opera admired by those who do not consider themselves fans of the composer.

In October 2013 the Vienna State Opera mounted a production of *La fanciulla del West* directed by Marco Arturo Marelli, who also designed the sets and lighting; two years later it appeared on both DVD and Blu-Ray. The singing on this video recording is, for the most part, outstanding. In the title role, Nina Stemme winningly combines strength and vulnerability. She has power and stamina to burn, tackling the role's wide tessitura and perilous high Cs as confidently as her character holds off threats to her property and virginity. At the same time, Stemme's Minnie has all but given up on love and on herself, retaining an undercurrent of sadness even in upbeat moments. Her quiet introspection, as she declares herself a good-for-nothing nobody, is heartbreaking. As the bandit Ramerrez, traveling under the pseudonym "Dick Johnson," Jonas Kaufmann is handsome and agile, a credible object of Minnie's initially awkward infatuation. While Kaufmann's dark voice lacks the customary Italianate *squillo*, he nonetheless triumphs over Puccini's frequently thick orchestration. Like Stemme, Kaufmann colors his interpretation with a tinge of

sadness, delivering Johnson's farewell aria, "Ch'ella mi creda," in an unusually subdued manner. Tomasz Konieczny, by contrast, is a highly volatile Sheriff Jack Rance, weeping over his unrequited love for Minnie in one scene and attempting to rape her in the next. Konieczny's baritone is powerful, though he is not in the same league as Kaufmann and Stemme, and his distorted Italian vowels quickly become distracting. In supporting roles, Norbert Ernst as Nick and Boaz Daniel as Sonora stand out among a uniformly strong ensemble.

The Vienna Philharmonic under Franz Welser-Möst generally succeeds in rendering Puccini's colorful orchestrations, and some details, like the ghostly violin harmonics heard while Minnie dresses for her date with Johnson, are a revelation. There are a few balance problems, such as the too-loud trumpets in the orchestral introduction and the too-quiet solo vocal lines in the opening scene, and occasionally the orchestra and singers fall out of sync. For the most part, Welser-Möst offers a compelling reading of the score, although he occasionally plows through Puccini's trademark broadening of the tempo before musical climaxes such as Minnie's first-act entrance.

Marelli updates the opera to what appears to be the 1980s or 90s, judging from the technology used on stage, and as sometimes happens, this approach creates as many problems as it solves. It would not be difficult to imagine an all-male mining camp in 1850, but the almost complete absence of women in a modern setting strains credibility. Scenes such as the miners' naively mangled Bible lesson and Larkens' "I want my mommy" emotional breakdown become almost unwatchable when performed by singers in modern dress. Marelli's updating sometimes strains at boundaries drawn by the opera's libretto. In this production, after Minnie shares her first-ever kiss with Johnson, the two

enthusiastically roll around on the floor. Following such a passionate display, it is comical – if inevitable, given the text – for the couple to separate and bed down chastely on opposite sides of Minnie’s house.

At the same time, some aspects of Marelli’s updated production are wonderfully creative. Minnie’s saloon now resembles a food truck parked in an enclosure surrounded by scaffolding and corrugated metal. Rather than strolling into the miners’ midst, the balladeer Jake Wallace is a disembodied voice emanating from a boom box. Where the score calls for him to pause his singing, astonished by the miners’ rapt attention, the recorded Wallace is instead silenced by a temporarily dislodged power cord. Marelli also manages to blunt *Fanciulla*’s most cringeworthy detail, its offensively stereotyped portrayal of the Native American characters Billy Jackrabbit and Wowkle. In Marelli’s interpretation, the couple’s baby is yet unborn, and Billy shows tender concern for his expectant partner. Unfortunately, this reading reflects badly on Minnie, who arranges for time alone with Johnson by ordering Wowkle – here, heavily pregnant -- out into a snowstorm.

Like much else about the visual component of this production, Dagmar Niefind’s costumes combine realism with touches of incomprehensible whimsy. The miners are conventionally clad in salt-of-the-earth work clothes, and Johnson wears unremarkable jeans, a vest, and a floor-length coat. But Rance’s black pleather pants and matching policeman’s hat are more Village People than Western lawman, and Minnie’s progressively monochromatic wardrobe is simply perplexing. While the blue denim overalls and flannel shirt that she wears in Act 1 are appropriately rough-and-ready, her fire-engine red hair is shockingly unnatural. Minnie’s head-to-toe red finery in Act 2 suggests an endearingly

unsophisticated attempt at glamor, but would this character really wear a bright red duster to rescue her lover from an attempted lynching in the opera's final scene?

It is in these final moments that Marelli's production takes a bizarre turn. After Minnie convinces the miners to defy Rance and release Johnson to her, a hot-air balloon magically drops from the sky to transport the lovers to their new life far away. A pickup truck would have been more appropriate, but Marelli is clearly aiming for a fantasy ending. Or is he? As the curtain slowly falls, a forlorn Jack Rance raises his pistol to his temple. While Konieczny has played the sheriff as emotionally unbalanced throughout the opera, this last-minute suicidal gesture is a cheap shot.

The DVD contains no bonus features, but its English subtitles are unexpectedly entertaining: Johnson and Minnie's declaration of everlasting devotion ("Io non ti lascio più") becomes "I'll cling to you like a burr," while the latter's acknowledgement of the lead characters' dubious morals is rendered as "You're a gambler, he's a bandit, and I'm a landlady!"

Overall, this is a musically compelling performance of a demanding score. If it fails to surmount *Fanciulla's* most intractable dramatic problems, adding a few new ones of its own, it is nonetheless redeemed by the committed singing of Stemme and Kaufmann.

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